

Deloris Jungert Davisson

On Track through a Beautiful Country

The Lewiston Historic Live Steam Railway, a non-profit volunteer organization, is moving “full steam ahead” with its project to operate a cultural tourist train on the Camas Prairie RailNet tracks in north central Idaho. Plans call for operating a live steam locomotive, a Railroad Diesel Car (RDC), and a self-contained “Mobile Museum on the tracks” on the 272 miles of track, tunnels, trestles, and bridges. The tracks traverse rugged mountainous terrain and rich prairie land, much of which lies within the boundary of the Nez Perce Indian Reservation. The tracks follow the route of Lewis and Clark, who trekked north and west along the Clearwater River some 200 years ago on their Corps of Discovery. At Spalding, the tracks run through the grounds of the Nez Perce National Historical Park.

The Mobile Museum and live steam locomotive’s future headquarters will be Lewiston, Idaho. Leaving Lewiston at about 720 feet elevation, the Camas Prairie RailNet runs on tracks built and operated by competitors, the Northern Pacific (now Burlington Northern) Railroad and the Union Pacific Railroad. The first RailNet subdivision leaves Lewiston moving east 11 miles to the old Joseph station at Spalding. From Spalding, the tracks run upriver through the Clearwater Canyon to Orofino, Kamiah, Kooskia, and Stites. The second subdivision climbs over

3,000 feet from Culdesac, up Lapwai Creek Canyon, negotiating a three-percent grade, through seven tunnels and 17 bridges.

Outstanding is the “Half Moon” bridge with its one million board feet of timber. From one vantage point, a person can see a lower bridge, two distant trestles and several tunnel entrances. This portion contains sharp curves, the greatest being 15 degrees. Elevation on top of the Winchester Hill reaches about 4,000 feet then drops across Camas Prairie through Craigmont, crossing Lawyer’s Canyon Bridge—over 1,500 feet long and 291 feet above the streambed. The tracks leave reservation land at Cottonwood and go on another 12 miles to Grangeville.

The area, historic and present-day homeland of the NiMiPoo Nez Perce, saw an influx of Europeans after members of the Lewis and Clark Corps of Discovery traveled the Clearwater River in September, 1805, and June, 1806. The missions at Lapwai, Kamiah, and Slickpoo, and especially the discovery of gold in the Orofino hills, created immigration interest in the area. It was not until the Nez Perce Reservation was defined in 1855, redefined in 1863, and after Old Joseph died, that white settlers, lumbermen, and ranchers moved into the valleys in ever-increasing numbers. After the Nez Perce Indian War of 1877, the Nez Perce were moved to reservation land. The Allotment Act of the 1890s enabled the sale of “unallotted” Indian lands to settlers, thus permitting the establishment of homesteads, villages and towns. Lumbermen, ranchers and farmers sought a way to ship out cherries, wool, timber, cattle, and grain. Laying the tracks for the Camas Prairie Railroad followed. The Camas Prairie Railroad continued to serve the area with passenger service through the 1960s and still serves a declining timber and agricultural economy with freight hauling.

The tracks offer spectacular views from the bridges, and trestles. One can watch freight trains crossing Bridge #40, an all-timber structure which is 493 feet long. At Cottonwood, grain elevators and wooden trestles overshadow the town.

As the bicentennial of the Lewis and Clark Corps of Discovery approaches, the area is turning its attention to the use of the railroad as a cultural resource. A train ride on the Mobile Museum will interpret the natural and cultural resources of the region. Visitors will learn of Nez Perce and settlers’ traditions: hunting deer, elk, moose and wild fowl; and fishing for salmon and sturgeon.

Bridge # 40 on the Camas Prairie Railroad’s Spalding-Grangeville branch line. Photo by C. Douglas Smith courtesy Smith & Smith, Inc.





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The train tracks run through groves of native trees along the Clearwater River, uplands of sagebrush, and riparian areas rich in plants and wildlife, many of which Meriwether Lewis documented and recorded with drawings and notes on the return trip of the Corps in June 1806. Today, visitors find the same flora and fauna, albeit invaded by exotic yellow-star thistle, knapweed, and cheat grass.

The train will make a stop at the Nez Perce National Historical Park's Visitor Center, where one can see a film on the culture and history of the Nez Perce people. There are also exhibits that include women's hats of woven dogbane hemp, beaded clothing, native dried foods, and information on how to make a flute.

The Mobile Museum of the Lewiston Historic Live Steam Railway Company will run regularly to the park's visitor center for an orientation on area cultural history. A brochure covers 38 park sites, many of which are visible from the train tracks. At the visitor center, scholars have access to archival materials pertaining to the history and resources of the area.

The cultural tourists will ride the Mobile Museum train to the park site at Kamiah to see the Nez Perce creation story site, "The Heart of the Monster." Kamiah was built on land purchased in 1905, after the allotment, from the estate of Allen Lawyer, a Nez Perce. Visitors will see the 19th-century Kate and Sue McBeth mission house as well as the Nez Perce Presbyterian Church.

The Lewiston Historic Live Steam Railway Company (LHLSRC) has had a dream since it began, in 1984, to plan for the restoration of a cultural tourism train running on the tracks and a railway museum engine house at the foot of Fifth and Railway streets in Lewiston. Funding from foundations and members, as well as visitors' fees, will finance this cultural and educational venture. Working on enrichment projects with area schools, the LHLSRC's project will offer a program through use of its Mobile Museum to teach youth further appreciation of their heritage.

During the first half of the 20th century, Idaho's Camas Prairie "Railroad on Stilts" was the integral transportation nerve connecting people with the natural, cultural, and economic resources of the region. It can again serve that function.

Deloris Jungert Davisson, a retired college professor, volunteers at the Nez Perce National Historical Park archives in Spalding, Idaho, and writes grants for the Lewiston Historic Live Steam Railroad Company in Lewiston, Idaho.

For further information about this project contact C. D. Smith, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Lewiston Historic Live Steam Railway Company, 610 1/2 Main Street, Lewiston, Idaho 83501, or email contrack@valinet.net or cdsmith@lewiston.com. For information about Nez Perce National Historical Park, write Route 1, Box 100, Spalding, Idaho 83540.

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